

The People Who Came

Our rich Jamaican heritage is depicted by our motto "Out of Many One People". Although over 90% of our population is comprised of individuals of African descent, the contribution of other ethnic groups such as the Indians, the Chinese, the Germans, the Jews, and the Syrians/Lebanese to the social and economic development of the country cannot go unnoticed.

AFRICANS

The first Africans arrived in Jamaica in 1513 as servants to the Spanish settlers. These Africans were freed by the Spanish when the English captured the island in 1655. They immediately fled to the mountains where they fought to retain their freedom and became the first Maroons.

With the advent of the Sugar Revolution, there was an acute labour shortage. This need was met by large scale importation of enslaved Africans. The result of the slave trade was that the majority of the Jamaican population was of African descent. From the time of the Africans arrival to the New World, there was miscegenation, leading to the rapid development of a coloured population.

The abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 did not mean that people of African origin no longer came to the island. In fact during the apprenticeship period (1834-1838) and in 1839, a number of persons of African descent came to Jamaica as free labourers. Also, in the following 25 years about 10, 000 free labourers of African origin came to the island.

The chief survivals of African culture are said to be in the parishes which had the largest number of these voluntary workers. For example, the kumina ritual of St. Thomas is one of the best known surviving rituals.

INDIANS

The East Indians are the largest ethnic minority in Jamaica. They arrived as indentured labourers between 1845 and 1917. The Indians came to Jamaica to earn a "fortune" for starting a better life back in India.

It has been noted that the religious sentiments of the Indians were not considered by the recruiting authorities, because, the majority of these immigrants were Hindus, followed by Muslims, yet priests were never recruited to satisfy the religious needs of the Indians. The priests who arrived came as indentured labourers and practised their priesthood as a part-time profession.

At the end of the indentureship contract, many Indians reverted to their ancestral occupations, some became farmers or fishermen, while others returned to the trades - barber, goldsmith and ironsmith. Some became money lenders.

The traditional Indian practice of naming the boys after gods and heroes and the girls after goddesses, rivers, flowers, seasons, moods, or words of great significance have now been completely abandoned. Almost every Indian regardless

of his or her religion has anglicized first and second names; the surnames too have been changed except for names such as Maragh and Singh.

The Indians introduced several plants and trees in Jamaica, the most common being betel leaves, betel nut, coolie plum, mango, jackfruit, and tamarind. The food habits of Indians have a distinctly Indian flavour and taste. A typical Indian dinner consists of curried goat, roti, pulses usually cooked with mangoes, curried potato, eggplant, bitter gourd and okra.

CHINESE

The Chinese represent a very small proportion of the Jamaican population, nevertheless, their impact has been great particularly in the area of commerce.

The first Chinese arrived in 1849. The Chinese were brought as indentured labourers to work on the sugar estates following the the emancipation of the slaves. However they disliked the nature of the work and soon left the left the estates and set up small grocery shops all across the island. Eventually they were able to develop their businesses until the small grocery shops grew into large enterprises embracing not only retailing, but also wholesaling and other types of activities.

Although some Chinese went back home to marry Chinese wives who they brought back to Jamaica, others inter-married with non-Chinese Jamaicans contributing to the island's racial mixture.

Apart from the development of commerce, the popularity of Chinese food among Jamaicans is a lasting contribution to the island.

GERMANS

The Germans came as indentured labourers. After emancipation, the Colonial Government of Jamaica adopted a programme of settling European peasants in the island. It was hoped that they would create a thriving settlement and act as a model for the ex-slaves. It was also hoped that if the hills were settled by Europeans, the ex-slaves would continue to work on on the large estates. The programme was never a success.

Between the years 1834 and 1838 about 1, 210 German immigrants arrived in the island. They were small trades people, a few farmers and disbanded soldiers of light calvary regiment.

In 1835, Lord Seaford gave 500 acres of his 10, 000 acre estate in Westmoreland for the Seaford Town German settlement. Initially over 200 German immigrants settled in Seaford Town in Westmoreland.

To survive the German settlers had to learn how to plant ground provisions and to speak patois. Presently no German is spoken with the exception of a few words known and used only by old people. A few German names such as Hacker, Eldemire, Wedemire, Grosskoph, Kleinhans and Schleifer, which have undergone slight spelling changes, have survived.

JEWS

The first Jews came to the island during the Spanish occupation of the island, 1494-1655. These Jews came from Spain and Portugal. They fled because of the Spanish inquisition. To conceal their identity they referred to themselves as "Portuguese" and practiced their religion secretly.

At the time of the British conquest of the island in 1655, General Venables recorded the presence of many "Portuguese" in Jamaica. The Jews were allowed to remain after the conquest and began to practice their religion openly.

The Jews were granted British citizenship by Cromwell and this was confirmed in 1660 by King Charles. They attained full political rights in 1831. The status of British citizenship enabled ownership of property by the Jews.

Jamaica's Jewish population was never large. However, their contribution to the economic and commercial life of the nation outstripped that of any other group of comparable size in Jamaica.

SYRIANS/LEBANESE

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, immigrants from the Middle East began arriving in Jamaica. The majority came from Lebanon, the others were from Damascus in Syria and from Bethlehem in Palestine. It is important to note that at the time of the first immigration to Jamaica, the Middle East area was known as Syria and Mount Lebanon was a part of Syria. Later when the countries were divided, the people from Mount Lebanon became known as Lebanese.

Turkish oppression was given as the main reason for the departure from the Middle East. When these immigrants arrived in Jamaica, many of them went into cultivating bananas or buying and selling. Many of these immigrants eventually gave up the banana business and went into retail trading since hurricanes often upset the banana industry.

Despite being a small percentage of the Jamaican population, this group has played a significant role in the commercial and industrial development of the economy. Through their influence as well, Syrian bread has become very popular among Jamaicans.